

Lines drawn on Sunday alcohol sales

(Rob Beecher / Meriden Record-Journal)

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A legislative study suggests proposed changes to Connecticut law to allow the retail sale of alcoholic beverages on Sundays could produce millions in tax revenue, but liquor store owners are rallying against what they say would have a negative impact on the state's liquor industry.

Liquor store owners Marc Rosen and Stephen Downes said Monday that they would attend a public hearing in Hartford next week because they feel a change would create additional costs for smaller businesses without generating the revenue the state expects.

"If it was something we believed could lead to more money for businesses or for the state, I'd be all for it. It won't do that," said Rosen, owner of Valencia Discount Liquor, at 1231 E. Main St. in Meriden. "This law won't create additional sales. It'll only shift sales from the smaller shops to grocery stores."

Senate Bill 204, presented on behalf of the Program Review and Investigations Committee, proposes eliminating the state's ban on Sunday sales in stores. The restriction dates from the colonial era's "blue laws."

The bill was submitted for discussion by several border-town legislators, including Sen. John A. Kissel, R-Enfield, co-chairman of the program review committee, after a study suggested it would increase alcohol sales and tax revenue for the state while boosting business for liquor store owners, especially near the state's borders. Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island all allow Sunday sales.

A copy of the study available online showed a potential increase of \$8 million to \$15 million in tax revenue if the law were repealed. The study said Colorado, which repealed its Sunday sales ban in 2008, has seen a 6 percent increase in sales tax revenue since then.

"I've voted against this proposal in the past, but I agreed to allow it in for discussion out of respect to those including Senator Kissel that believe it is an issue near the borders," said Rep. Mary M. Mushinsky, D-Wallingford, the committee co-chairwoman. "We need to examine the issue thoroughly and determine if it's something that would benefit the state or not."

Rosen and Downes, owner of CT Beverage Mart in Wallingford and Newington, said they're certain the bill would not help stores in central Connecticut.

Both said the projected tax numbers are inflated. They said that although a few residents go to neighboring states for alcohol on Sunday, most are going out of state for price, not because of the day of the week.

Downes said he has spoken with several business owners near the border, and although some are asking for the change, most have told him they fear they would lose more business to bigger stores.

"It's a change that would really benefit the grocery industry, not liquor stores," Downes said. "Sunday is one of their busiest days of the week, and if you open up the opportunity for them to sell on Sundays, it gives an unfair advantage that will shift the sale of alcohol from smaller stores to the grocery chains."

Opening on Sunday would also increase the operating costs for local stores, Rosen said. Both Rosen and Downes said they're concerned about potential effects on the bar industry.

John Timino, owner of JC's Place, a sports cafe at 686 Old Colony Road in Meriden, said most of his Sunday customers are regulars and bars in the area are not likely to be affected.

Police have also expressed concerns over repealing the ban, saying that allowing sale of alcohol outside bars on Sunday could lead to more drunken driving and more problems with underage drinking.

"There's a certain level of enforcement with underage drinking in particular that could become a problem," said West Hartford Police Chief James Strillacci, legislative liaison for the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. "If grocery stores sell alcohol on Sundays, younger and less experienced clerks could face peer pressure or make mistakes which allow minors to gain access to alcohol."

There have been several vocal opponents to these arguments however, including the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States and the Connecticut Food Association, both of which have asked the state to repeal the law.

Stan Sorkin, president of the food trade association, said the law does not allow free market sales. He also cited the committee study, noting the income it could bring to local businesses and the state.

"It's just poor business for these businesses not to be able to sell one of their top commodities during the busiest day of the week. It's a throwback to the prohibition laws that were found to be unconstitutional," he said. "There's also a major disconnect between those in the middle of the state who don't feel the pressure and those at the border who are losing sales."

Sorkin said the free market issue alone should be enough for the state to consider the change. When a market is left to regulate itself, it's the consumer who wins, he said.

Rep. Vincent Candelora, R-North Branford, a member of the program review committee, said the state will have the challenge of reviewing the study and determining whether a change would have a positive impact on the state or a negative impact on small businesses.

"On the one hand it's a free market issue, and on the other it's a quality of life issue for these liquor store owners," said Candelora, a small business owner whose district includes part of Wallingford. "It's an issue we need to be very careful about to make sure we have the facts and make the right decision for this state."

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